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### **Examining social presence in an online learning environment of adult learners**

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Educational institutions, especially to offer courses in the distance mode, are increasingly adopting online learning methods. However, the lack of face-to-face interactions in a typical text-based online learning environment could create a feeling of social isolation among the learners, resulting in a negative learning experience. Social presence is identified as an important factor that helps people to actively collaborate in an online learning environment. It is the ability of participants to present themselves as “real persons” in an online learning environment, and is considered to be an element of interpersonal communication between learners. This paper describes a study that examined the development of social presence among a group of adult learners, in an online learning environment. The investigation focused on the following research questions: What are the types of social presence observed in the online learning environment? What is the effect of social presence on the learners? and, What is the role of the instructor in creating social presence?

A case study method was used in this study. The participants were a group of teacher educators who followed a professional development programme in the distance mode. Multiple techniques such as content analysis of the transcripts of learners’ postings in the discussion fora, questionnaire and interviews were used for data collection. Participants had used different techniques of social presence in varying degrees. Expression of emotions and feelings, sharing frustrations and satisfactions, supporting each other and stating humorous comments were the mostly observed social presence styles. The “connectedness” with their peers and the feeling of “not being alone” was a highly motivating, and a supportive factor, for learners to move along in the learning process.

Social presence has been a crucial factor which supported the learners to engage themselves in their learning at a distance, in the online learning environment. Social isolation was kept to a minimum, despite the physical separation of learners. Collaborative learning among learners was highly enhanced by social presence, and resulted in creating a closely-bonded learning community. The role of the instructor as a facilitator in building up social presence in an online learning environment is very important.